

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 479

CG 011 886

AUTHOR Evans, Alan L.
TITLE Selected Results from a Study of Personality Characteristics of Child Abusing Mothers.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (Seattle, Washington, April 1977)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; *Developmental Psychology; Family Problems; Individual Characteristics; *Mothers; Parent Child Relationship; *Personality; Personality Tests; *Psychopathology; Research Projects; Welfare Problems

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate personality characteristics of child abusers, utilizing the results of the Melnick-Hurley (1969) study. Subjects were 40 mothers receiving Aid to Dependent Children in Ingham County, Michigan. Each of the 20 "abusive" mothers had abused at least one of her children within six months prior to testing. To measure differences between the abusive and nonabusive mothers, an objective questionnaire and a projective test were administered. Findings support a report by Melnick and Hurley of major personality differences between abusive and non-abusive mothers. These differences appear independent of race. The present results more firmly outline the pervasiveness of the abusive mother's psychopathology, and suggest that basic character traits, such as Trust versus Mistrust of others, are involved, while information and attitudes toward discipline seem less relevant. This finding implies that psychotherapy for abusive women might fruitfully focus upon basic developmental issues. These clear personality differences also raise the possibility of useful predictive measures. (Author/JLL)

* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *

ED146479

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alan L. Evans

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Selected Results From A Study of
Personality Characteristics of
Child Abusing Mothers

Alan L. Evans, Ph.D.
Oregon State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO-
DUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGIN-
ATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT
OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Few controlled studies are reported in literature on child abusing parents using objective and projective psychological measures of personality. Melnick and Hurley (1969) administered to abusive and matched, non-abusive mothers a series of personality measures: Family Concept Inventory, California Test of Personality, and Thematic Apperception Test. The results indicated that abusive parents had a lower self-concept, a higher need for nurturance, higher TAT pathogenesis scores and were more frustrated in their attempts at meeting their emotional needs.

Wright (1976) administered Rorschach Inkblots, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), and the Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Study to abusive parents and a control group. Despite a relatively small subject group and a large number of dependent variables, Wright concluded that the psychopathology of abusive parents is only demonstrable using psychological measures having disguised intent. Paulson, Afifi, Thomason, and Liu (1975) gave the MMPI to 60 abusive parents and 100 controls. Item analysis revealed that 33 items discriminated the one group from the other with two each of "false positives" and "false negatives".

The goal of the present study was to further investigate personality characteristics of child abusers, utilizing the results of the Melnick-Hurley study and the increased knowledge regarding child abuse to conduct a more comprehensive and wide-ranging study than had heretofore been done.

CG 011886

Significant elements of the Melnick-Hurley study were replicated; other aspects suggested by the literature were included for study, and hypotheses generated by the author's work with abusive parents were tested. A larger number of subjects than previously reported in studies of the personality of abusive mothers were included in the study.

The basic hypothesis of the research was that mothers who physically abuse their children would manifest substantially greater psychopathology as measured by personality tests compared to a control group of non-abusive mothers. Abusive mothers (AMs) were expected to score higher than non-abusive mothers (NAMs) on measures of aggression and hostility, depression and apathy, pathogenesis, preference for punishment-oriented disciplinary stance, lack of affective expression, and frustrated needs for dominance, independence, and nurturance. AMs were expected to score lower than NAMs on measures reflecting the successful resolution of Erikson's postulated developmental conflicts. NAMs were anticipated to score above AMs on measures of self-esteem, positive family concept, nurturance, and a preference for using rewards for disciplinary purposes.

To measure the hypothesized differences between the abusive and non-abusive mothers, an objective questionnaire and a projective test were administered. The objective questionnaire was designed to measure consciously held attitudes and personality data of which the mothers were aware and which they would report. The projective test was administered in order to obtain data on more underlying feelings and attitudes, aspects of which the mothers may have been unaware or unwilling to report directly.

The objective questionnaire included MMPI scales of Depression and Apathy and Resentment and Aggression developed by Tyron (1966), the Sense of Personal Worth scale from the California Test of Personality, questionnaire

measures of Reward- and Punishment- oriented disciplinary attitudes developed by McKinney (1971), and a modified version of a scale developed by Wessman and Ricks (1966) to assess resolution of Eriksonian developmental conflicts. Projective measures were selected stimuli from the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). TAT responses were coded by three trained undergraduate raters to yield seven measures: aggression, nurturance, pathogenesis (Meyer and Karon, 1967), absence of affective expression, frustrated dominance, frustrated independence, and frustrated nurturance. (The average, Spreaman-Brown corrected, rater reliability for the TAT coded scores was .94.) Data reflecting the actuarial variables of the mothers age, years of education, number of children and average age of children were collected and race and marital status were recorded in order to assess the relationship of other potentially important variables.

Forty mothers participated in the study. All were receiving Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), were voluntary participants, and were residents of Ingham County, Michigan. The abusive mothers were twenty clients of the Protective Services Unit of Ingham County Department of Social Services and can best be characterized as moderately abusive, not sufficiently abusive to warrant immediate court action but sufficiently abusive to warrant protective case work. It was confirmed from case records that each mother termed abusive had abused at least one of her children within six months prior to testing. The control group included 20 mothers who were clients of the Basic Family Services (BFS) Unit of Ingham County Social Services and were randomly selected from the then current active case load. BFS clients are ADC mothers who require informational and supportive services in regard to home, money, health, education and personal problems. The non-abusive mothers were confirmed as such by their case worker. Each mother was paid \$7.50 to participate in the study, free transportation

was made available, and a licensed baby sitter was provided free of charge. All mothers were told that the purpose of the experiment was to study family attitudes of ADC mothers.

The decision to not tell the participants the exact nature of the investigation was not taken lightly. To investigate the phenomenon of child abuse it is necessary to face the dilemma of whether the issue of full disclosure to participants of the exact nature of research should take precedence over studying a very serious social problem, a problem which cannot be reduced without considerably additional research. Needed research would not likely have been done if the full intent of the study was revealed. It is the author's position that telling the subjects that the intent of the study was the investigation of family attitudes on the part of ADC mothers was sufficient since strict anonymity of the participants was maintained.

Statistically significant differences in the expected directions were found between the abusive and non-abusive mothers, using multivariate analysis of covariance with all non-nominal acutarial measures as covariates, for 13 of the 20 dependent variables. The F -ratio for the multivariate test of equality of mean vectors of the abusive and non-abusive groups on the objective tests indicated highly significant differences ($F = 4.6$; $df = 6, 28$; $p < .003$). On four objective test measures the null hypotheses of no association between abusive and non-abusive groups with 1 and 33 degrees of freedom were rejected at high levels of significance. Family Concept Inventory ($AM \bar{X} = 102.6$; $NAM \bar{X} = 128.6$; $F = 14.7$; $p < .0006$), Resentment and Aggression ($AM \bar{X} = 10.8$; $NAM \bar{X} = 7.0$; $F = 13.8$; $p < .0008$), Depression and Apathy ($AM \bar{X} = 14.8$; $NAM \bar{X} = 9.4$; $F = 9.0$; $p < .005$), and Sense of Personal Worth ($AM \bar{X} = 7.0$; $NAM \bar{X} = 10.7$; $F = 22.6$; $p < .0001$).

The null hypothesis could not be rejected at the .05 level for the measure of Punishment ($AM \bar{X} = 32.2$; $NAM \bar{X} = 33.6$; $F = 1.0$; $p < .33$) or for the measure of Reward ($AM \bar{X} = 37.1$; $NAM \bar{X} = 39.0$; $F = 0.0$; $p < .99$).

On the Eriksonian measures the F -ratio for the multivariate test of equality of mean vectors also indicated a highly significant difference between the means of the abusive and non-abusive groups ($F = 3.9$; $df = 6, 28$; $p < .005$). The null hypotheses of no association between the means of the abusive and non-abusive groups on the first six Eriksonian stages with 1 and 33 degrees of freedom were reflected at highly significant levels: Trust versus Basic Mistrust ($AM \bar{X} = 5.7$; $NAM \bar{X} = 13.0$; $F = 12.2$; $p < .001$), Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt ($AM \bar{X} = 8.1$; $NAM \bar{X} = 10.9$; $F = 5.1$; $p < .03$), Initiative versus Guilt ($AM \bar{X} = 4.7$; $NAM \bar{X} = 12.0$; $F = 13.9$; $p < .0008$), Industry versus Inferiority ($AM \bar{X} = 6.5$; $NAM \bar{X} = 14.8$; $F = 11.1$; $p < .002$), Identity versus Role Confusion ($AM \bar{X} = -2.6$; $NAM \bar{X} = 5.1$; $F = 6.6$; $p < .01$), and Intimacy versus Isolation ($AM \bar{X} = 6.2$; $NAM \bar{X} = 15.0$; $F = 13.0$; $p < .001$). The difference between the means for Generativity versus Stagnation was marginally significant ($AM \bar{X} = 11.0$; $NAM \bar{X} = 14.5$; $F = 3.2$; $p < .08$).

The F -ratio for the multivariate test of equality of mean vectors of the TAT measures for the abusive and non-abusive groups was significant as well ($F = 2.8$; $df = 7, 30$; $p < .02$). The means of two individual variables were sufficiently different to allow rejection of the null hypothesis: Aggression ($AM \bar{X} = 15.9$; $NAM \bar{X} = 11.3$; $F = 5.8$; $p < .02$) and Frustrated Independence ($AM \bar{X} = 2.8$; $NAM \bar{X} = 4.1$; $F = 6.3$; $p < .02$). The TAT pathogenesis measure marginally distinguished between the groups by the two-tailed test ($AM \bar{X} = .828$; $NAM \bar{X} = .728$; $F = 3.31$; $p < .08$) although this difference was significant by the more appropriate one-tailed test.

The effects of mother's chronological age, education, number and

average age of children were either statistically non-significant or were controlled for in the multivariate analyses, as were race and marital status. As can be seen from the following discriminant analysis, however, the non-nominal actuarial measures did contribute to group differentiation.

Applying discriminant analysis to these data, 85% (34 of 40) of these mothers were correctly classified into abusive versus non-abusive groups by the six non-Eriksonian objective measures and also by the seven Eriksonian scales. The TAT measures correctly classified 83.5% of these women. Even higher classificatory accuracy was achieved by combinations of these measures. The optimal combination, including the actuarial measures, produced nearly perfect (97.5%) discrimination between the abusive and non-abusive mothers. The most powerful standardized discriminant function coefficients, in descending order, were: TAT Frustrated Independence (3.57); TAT Aggression (-2.7); Pathogenesis (2.09); Frustrated Domiance (-2.06); Average Age of Children (1.99); Eriksonian Trust versus Basic Mistrust (1.97); MMPI Depression and Apathy (1.56); Eriksonian Intimacy versus Isolation (1.43); Eriksonian Identity versus Role Confusion (-1.24); and Number of Children (-1.14).

There were many significant intercorrelations among the personality measures. An examination of their interrelationships for the pooled samples based upon McQuitty's (1957) typal analysis revealed a single diffuse cluster. Its primary positive pole was anchored by Eriksonian Trust and Industry scales versus a negative pole anchored by two MMPI scales: Depression and Apathy plus Resentment and Aggression. A secondary positive pole was defined by the Sense of Personal Worth scale of California Test of Personality and Eriksonian Initiative. A secondary negative pole was best denoted by TAT Frustrated Nurturance and TAT Aggression. A comparison

of the intercorrelational structures within the abusive and non-abusive subgroups revealed similar patterns with the notable exception of the TAT Aggression. This latter variable linked with relatively objective aspects of family structures for the non-abusive mothers, correlating positively with having older children ($r = .43$) and using Punishment as a disciplinary method ($r = .46$). Among the abusive mothers, however, TAT Aggression correlated significantly more highly than for non-abusive mothers with TAT Frustrated Dominance ($r = .59$), and TAT Frustrated Independence ($r = .55$). Finer appraisal of the responses which contributed to TAT Aggression suggested a qualitative difference. The abusive mothers tended to produce responses featuring violent deaths more frequently than did the non-abusive mothers. Related themes were apparent in the abusive mother's more frequent positive responses to certain questionnaire items: "At times I think I am no good at all" (80% vs. 30%) and "At times I feel like smashing things" (75% vs. 35%).

The present findings support a prior report of major personality differences between abusive and non-abusive mothers by Melnick and Hurley. These differences appear independent of race, for the present study was based upon a predominantly White sample (82.5%), whereas the Melnick-Hurley sample was all Black. The present results more firmly outline the pervasiveness of abusive mother's psychopathology and suggest that basic character traits--such as Trust versus Mistrust of others--are involved, while information and attitudes toward discipline seem less relevant. This finding implies that psychotherapy for abusive women might fruitfully focus upon basic developmental issues. Despite the apparently low base rate of child abuse in the general United States population, these clear personality differences between abusive and non-abusive women raise the possibility of useful predictive measures.

Bibliography

- McKinney, J. The Development of Values, Prescriptive or Proscriptive? Human Development, 1971, 14, 41-80.
- McQuitty, L. L. Elementary linkage analysis for isolative orthogonal and oblique types and typal relevances. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1957, 17, 207-229.
- Melnick, B. and Hurley, J. Distinctive personality attributes of child-abusive mothers. Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology, 1969, 33, 746-749.
- Meyer R. G and Karon, B. P. The schizophrenogenic mother concept and the TAT, Psychology, 1967, 30, 173-181.
- Paulson, M., Abdelmonem, A., Afifi, A., Thomason, M., and Liu, V. An MMPI scale for identifying "At risk" abusive parents. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 1975, 4 (1), 22-24.
- Tryon, R. Unrestricted Cluster and Factor Analysis with Applications to the MMPI and Holzinger-Harmon Problems. Multivariate Behavioral Research, 1966, 1, 229-244.
- Wessman, A. and Ricks, D. Mood and Personality. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1966.
- Wright, L. The "sick but slick" syndrome as a personality component of parents of battered children. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 1976, 32 (1), 41-45.